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Red Brick Without Onion Towers: Protestant Life in the Russian Enclave of Kaliningrad

by William E. Yoder

Bill Yoder is a Berlin-based church journalist who has been devoting extended periods of time in recent years to assist in the rebuilding of church life in Kaliningrad Region. A frequent contributor to REE for many years, Yoder, an American, received his Dr.phil. in Political Science from the Free University of Berlin (1991) with a dissertation on the views of Bishop Otto Dibelius about German unity.

There are certain parallels between the present Russian enclave of Kaliningrad (Königsberg) and the erstwhile political island of West Berlin. Kaliningrad, roughly 180 km from east to west, is larger and poorer than West Berlin was and suffers from indifferent parents. The pending acceptance of its only immediate neighbors (Poland and Lithuania) into the European Union will lead at least initially to a further isolation of the territory. The Cold War is over, yet border crossings into the enclave remain a protracted and bureaucratic affair - for which Polish and Lithuanian authorities are no less at fault. Different from Berlin is free access to the territory from the Motherland by sea (by ferry from St. Petersburg).

This region and its population of nearly 1 million may be one of Russia's poorhouses, but it has strong geographic pluses. Like East Berlin of yore, it has become a stepping stone to Europe's political West. Kaliningrad is located only 600 km. from Berlin; Moscow is twice as far. For Russians of German heritage, it is the most attractive locale for sniffing German air while remaining solidly within the familiar boundaries of the Russian Federation. Much red German brick remains; the onion towers of Russia are barely in evidence. The region remains for some Germans a highly emotive, special entity, for it was German for 700 years until 1945. Yet virtually all ethnic Germans who reside there now have arrived from Soviet Central Asia. Of the approximately 112 Germans - mostly young orphans - who were allowed to remain in the territory after 1948, only 12 are still alive.

There are also Germans, perhaps numbered in three digits, who have moved back to the region from Germany. Most of these are East Prussian-born pensioners.

Besides certain German and Polish circles, Lithuanian interests in particular lay claim to this terrain. One sign of this is Klaipeda's (Memel's) "Museum of Lithuania Minor" - Lithuania's term for most of the region of the Kaliningrad enclave. Soviet authorities had allowed Lithuanian
interests to restore the ruined church of Christian Donalitius, a Lutheran pastor and 18th century Lithuanian novelist, in Chistiye Prudy (Tollmingkehmen). This church in the southeastern corner of the Kaliningrad region was opened as a Lithuanian museum in 1979.

The story of the recovery of church life in the Kaliningradskaya Oblast is a remarkable one. As a Soviet military zone and socialist model territory off-limits to Westerners, all public church life was forbidden after 1948. For 40 years, believers wanting to attend church were forced to travel to Lithuania. Strangely enough, it was the Baptists who were registered first, in 1967. But it still was not smooth sailing for them: Soon thereafter a meeting house was bulldozed because of supposed legal irregularities. Not until 1985 did the Orthodox and somewhat later other religious communities such as the New Apostolic attain official registration.

The most remarkable story of recovery is perhaps the Lutheran one. Since 1989 the Propstei Kaliningrad, part of the St. Petersburg-based "Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia and Other States" (ELCROS), has blossomed from 0 to 43 parishes with 3,000 baptized members. This has occurred despite the fact that the enclave serves as a turnstile: At least that many Lutherans have already emigrated to Germany only to be replaced by new ethnic Germans and their families from further East. The 800 "registered" Baptists remaining in the region have been seriously weakened by the exodus of their own westward. In contrast to the Baptists or Pentecostals, Lutherans have a decidedly German flavor. Most of their services are bilingual, they receive major material and personnel support from Germany.

The situation of the 18,000 Lutherans in neighboring Lithuania is quite different: The competing influences between a liberal German Lutheranism and the confessionalist Lutheranism of the US-based Missouri - and Wisconsin - Synod is apparent in Lithuania. Yet this divide remains strangely absent from the enclave. This is surely due to the close alliance between the parishes of the enclave and Germany. Elsewhere in Russia, competition between North American, German and Finnish Lutheran missions has lead to a partial unraveling of Lutheran structures. This is especially true in Belarus. Kiev, Ukraine boasts five different Lutheran denominations, Novosibirsk, approximately four.

In stark contrast to Polish East Prussia, Russian East Prussia remains a land pockmarked by church ruins, some of them dating to the Crusader period in the 14th and 15th centuries. Of its
224 churches, 158 of them have been completely destroyed or exist only as ruins. The Lutheran church regularly uses only one of the original structures: the diminutive and consequently well-suited Salzburg church in Gusev (Gumbinnen). The 14th-century church at Gvardeyskoye (Mühlhausen), where Martin Luther's daughter Margarethe von Kuenheim lies somewhere buried, is one of several churches being restored by private German foundations. Parsonages and secular buildings of similar size are seen as best-suited to the modest needs of the budding Lutheran communities. The Lutherans have constructed only one new church: Kaliningrad's grand "Church of the Resurrection" was dedicated in April 1999.

Cathedrals have always been a political statement of a people's self-understanding and intentions. The massive Orthodox cathedral slowly climbing skyward behind the statue of Lenin on Kaliningrad's Victory Square is no exception. Traditional Russians do not regard East Prussia's churches as part of a shared European cultural heritage. During tumultuous scenes at a Kaliningrad roundtable last November, politicians insisted that "no German cultural monument is comparable to the sacrifices which the Soviet Union brought in the war against fascism".

The 1991-registered Roman Catholic church, which has strong Polish support and is in ethnic terms heavily Polish and Lithuanian, seems particularly well-organized. Its prefabricated, plywood chapels, children's homes and humanitarian projects seem a model of Prussian orderliness. They have roughly 15 clerics in the region - probably more than the Orthodox. Their strong presence surely supports the continued downward slide of ecumenical relations with the Orthodox. Yet worsening ecumenical relations are also a simple reflection of the larger Russian trend.

Kaliningrad with its population of 450,000 lists seven charismatic and Pentecostal congregations: Two better-known ones stem from the Baltimore-based "Greater Grace" mission and the Russian "Novoye Pokolenie" (New Generation) denomination. Today's Kaliningrad boasts a small Jewish synagogue, a mosque is in the planning stages.

Convincing Russians of working age to remain and not continue their trip westward remains a formidable challenge to those concerned about the future of the local church. "Rat und Tat" (Word and Deed), a fledgling Lutheran initiative for training small entrepreneurs and supplying them with loans, is attempting to give local persons an economic reason for staying. Without a viable economy, the region's churches - and their members - will remain dependent
upon outside sources for continued survival. It is not the "New Russian" economic elite which demonstrates an affinity for Protestantism.